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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: POST DEMOCRACY PROMOTION STRATEGY

REF: STATE 191395

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reasons 1.4 (b, d)

11. (C) Summary: Ethiopia's May 2005 national elections delivered a shock to the country's nascent democratic system for which no one was prepared. Opposition parties' unexpectedly strong showing frightened the GOE into rolling back some elements of what had been an unprecedented democratic opening during the campaign. The results also emboldened the inexperienced CUD opposition leaders to issue a premature declaration of victory from which it proved impossible for them to walk back. With most of the CUD leadership now in prison and the GOE struggling to control popular resentment in urban areas, the environment for promoting democracy has grown more challenging. Nonetheless, the election results themselves and the process of political dialogue that post has promoted continue to offer opportunities. Our key objectives include lowering tensions, improving human rights, broadening representation and participation in Parliament, boosting the credibility and capacity of the National Electoral Board, and increasing access to the media as well as the quality of public information. Our strategy must be a mixture of cooperation and pressure with both the GOE and leading opposition organizations in order to overcome Ethiopia's culture of political confrontation and build one based on consensus-building through compromise. End Summary.

12. (C) Ethiopia is a country with 3,000 years of recorded history -- and practically no history of genuine democracy. Millennia of sometimes enlightened, sometimes bloody monarchy came to an end in 1974 when the Derg imposed a brutal, Marxist military government. The DERG were in turn forced out of power after a 17-year armed struggle by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The TPLF went on to form the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition, along with affiliated parties the TPLF helped organize along ethnic lines. The EPRDF and its principal leader, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, have ruled this geographically and ethnically diverse nation since 1991. While EPRDF leaders originally espoused a Marxist outlook, once in power the EPRDF began laying the foundations for multi-party democracy, along with an approach to governance known as ethnic federalism. Under the latter arrangement, Ethiopia's provincial boundaries were redrawn to reflect ethnic majorities in each area, and a regional councils were given new additional authority for local decision-making. National elections in 1995 and 2000 failed to establish a true multi-party system however, as alleged EPRDF harassment and strong-arm tactics prompted most potential opposition parties and candidates to boycott the polls. In early 2005, Ethiopia's 547-seat Lower House contained just 12 opposition

MPs.

13. (C) In late 2004, the campaign for 2005 national elections began in an atmosphere of unprecedented openness. The GOE engaged in less harassment of opponents than in previous campaigns, and permitted a revolutionary series of candid debates on key issues that was broadcast live throughout the country. Many disparate opposition parties came together in two large coalitions, the larger Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and the smaller United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF), and both coalitions conducted energetic and effective campaigns. GOE electoral authorities at the NEB worked closely with international technical experts and permitted international observers, including the Carter Center and European Union Observer Mission (EOM). Polling day on May 15 was also largely free of major irregularities until initial returns began to show a surprisingly strong showing by the opposition. At that point, international observers reported that significant irregularities began to occur in the counting process. The opposition at first cried foul, then claimed victory, and finally launched a barrage of specific challenges to the announced results. With the help of international mediation, the GOE established a new process for resolving electoral complaints whose results ultimately failed to satisfy either opposition supporters or international observers. In August, after three months of political wrangling and demonstrations, the GOE announced final election results in which the opposition was awarded over 170 seats. The major opposition coalitions continued to claim they had won the election; the Carter Center estimated privately that opposition parties may have been cheated out of 30-50 additional seats, still far short of a majority.

14. (C) Charge Huddleston and the EU Troika Ambassadors

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facilitated a dialogue between the GOE and opposition leaders in late September and early October designed to address concerns about Ethiopia's democratic institutions and persuade reluctant opposition leaders to join the new Parliament and regional councils. Major issues in the dialogue included the GOE's imposition of more restrictive rules for debate in Parliament following the elections, lack of opposition access to state media (the only broadcast media) and the NEB's alleged lack of independence. The GOE made some promises in each area, but refused to allow discussion of changes to the NEB board. The dialogue ultimately broke down over this issue. UEDF leaders decided that enough progress had been made to justify entering Parliament, but CUD leaders chose to boycott Parliament as well as the Addis Ababa Regional Council, which they would have controlled. The CUD decided in late October to continue pressing its reform agenda through civil disobedience, but the situation quickly deteriorated into violent protests that swept the country. The GOE quelled the unrest, but killed at least 40 people and imprisoned over 20,000 people in the process. Among those imprisoned were 25 senior officials of the CUD as well as other party leaders around the country. These incidents further increased political tensions and deepened popular animosity toward the GOE, particularly in urban areas.

15. (C) Below are key elements of post's strategy for promoting democracy in Ethiopia, keyed to specific taskings in reftel.

Democratic Deficits and Near-term Benchmarks for Improvement

16. (C) Identify the key areas of democratic deficit and the 3-5 most important desired outcomes over the next 6-8 months:

Most democratic institutions in Ethiopian are weak and subject to political manipulation, and therefore inspire little public confidence. This lack of confidence in public

institutions -- including the National Electoral Board, Parliament and the judicial system -- recently prompted key actors, from political parties to voters themselves, to look for solutions on the streets, rather than through the established political process. Post urged opposition leaders to accept substantial gains made in the imperfect 2005 electoral process and build on them, while at the same time taking their specific grievances to court. Key party leaders and the majority of their constituents instead chose a strategy of confrontation with GOE authorities.

Other areas of democratic deficit are the lack of private broadcast media, new (often informal) restrictions on private print media, restrictions on peaceful political activity and harassment of opposition political organizations, and inadequate respect for the rule of law as seen in arbitrary arrests and detention.

Most important desired outcomes over the next 6-8 months:

- 1) At least 80 percent of elected Coalition for Unity and Democracy MPs take seats in Parliament and the Addis Ababa Regional Council;
- 2) Parliamentary rules revised to offer opposition parties more opportunities to participate in legislative debate;
- 3) Appointment of a more independent National Electoral Board and more effective preparation for local elections in 2006/7;
- 4) Revision of the media law, increased space for private media and opposition access to state media;
- 5) Release of all those detained following November 2005 demonstrations except in those cases where the GOE can credibly prove criminal acts.

Six-Month Strategy for Democracy Promotion

17. (C) What is post's six-month strategy for achieving the above outcomes?

1) We will continue to promote political dialogue, compromise and reconciliation through diplomatic contacts and pressure on the GOE and key opposition leaders. The dialogue will focus on specific steps to strengthen Ethiopian democratic

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institutions and reinforce all parties' commitments to a successful multi-party system. We will call on intervention by senior USG officials and other international leaders at appropriate times to advance the process, both through private contacts and public statements.

2) We will also seek to build a vocal and powerful constituency for dialogue -- and opposition participation in the democratic process -- through contacts with civil society leaders as well as messages to the general public. We have begun an initiative to involve influential, independent leaders from a variety of sectors in a focused dialogue to build national consensus on Ethiopia's medium- and long-term path to democracy and development that we are calling "Envisioning Ethiopia 2020."

3) We will work with other donors in the Development Assistance Group (DAG) to introduce specific governance indicators in Ethiopia's next five-year sustainable development plan, known locally as the Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty (PASDEP). Such indicators, which will include human rights and democracy benchmarks, have not been incorporated previously in the donors' matrix for evaluating GOE performance. Negotiating them will be difficult, but will they will assist us in applying steady, low-profile but effective pressure on the GOE for democratic opening.

4) We will maintain calls for the release of CUD leaders, NGO leaders, journalists and others detained in connection with recent political violence. We will work with other donor governments and technical organizations like the ICRC and Prison Fellowship to monitor both judicial procedures and detainee welfare.

5) We will measure Parliament using the Prime Minister's yardstick. PM Meles said publicly and privately that the GOE would revise Parliamentary rules if it could be demonstrated that opposition parties faced a more restrictive environment than their counterparts did in developed democracies including Canada, the UK, Germany and India. Post is cooperating with other donors on a study comparing Ethiopia's Parliamentary environment with those the PM indicated. With the study in hand, we will seek to hold the PM to his word using a calibrated mix of private and public pressure. We will also cooperate with other donor governments in providing assistance to Parliament in partnership with a multi-party steering committee. Such activities will include orientation for new members, training for women Parliamentarians and seminars designed to foster a more open, respectful and cooperative institutional culture. Finally, we will also seek to increase public access to and confidence in Parliament through a series of targeted programs.

6) We will similarly engage with the NEB, along with other donors, to address the organization's technical and political weaknesses. The Carter Center report, and those of other international electoral observer missions, will provide useful analyses for this exercise. We will seek to organize a high-profile seminar involving representatives from exemplary African or other electoral authorities. We will also push the ruling and opposition parties toward a consultative process on the selection of a new, impartial NEB Board; the GOE says a new board will be chosen by May 2006.

7) Through the above-mentioned political dialogues and at other opportunities, we will seek to create space for more independent, professional and ethical media as well as fair access for opposition parties and other non-government viewpoints on state media. Achieving GOE approval for private broadcast media will be one key goal, as will supporting the GOE's stated objective of a code of conduct -- one that will still allow media organizations essential freedoms. The GOE has already agreed to donor assistance in developing a new media law and code of conduct, which the GOE has promised will reflect international standards. We will employ PD programming to train journalists and highlight best practices.

8) We will encourage both the GOE and the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) to resume discussions aimed at reincorporating the OLF in the legal, democratic system. The OLF continues to enjoy significant support in the vast, populous region of Oromia. Its participation in peaceful political activity and future elections would contribute to a more representative and legitimate democracy in Ethiopia.

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9) Though Ethiopia has not yet come close to qualifying for Millennium Challenge Account (MCA) resources, we will seek to engage the GOE in detailed discussions on this process that will make clear the potential rewards for a dramatic improvement in governance and development policies more generally.

Resources and Engagement from Washington

18. (C) Post's existing USAID budget for democracy and governance gives us some important tools to work with, as well as programs already in progress that we can adapt to our

new circumstances. We also cooperate closely with other large donor countries and institutions in the Development Assistance Group (DAG) as well as the Ambassadors' Donors Group. Where we may need additional assistance, however, is in increasing resources available for public affairs programming.

¶9. (C) High-level Department engagement will also be extremely valuable. A visit from the Secretary, for example, would allow us to amplify our message and maximize our leverage. (A visit to Addis would also allow the Secretary to engage with leaders at the African Union and showcase our extensive support to this important continental institution.)

The Secretary could recognize our long-standing and generally successful partnership with the GOE on fighting terrorism, poverty and HIV/AIDS, while at the same time pushing for progress on our democracy agenda. Post plans to inaugurate an American Corner at Addis Ababa's brand new National Library and Archives on March 7, which would offer a visiting Department principal to speak to Ethiopians about the importance of the free flow of information and education for democracy and development.

¶10. (C) We would also like to continue to count on periodic interventions from senior Department officials, including AF A/S Frazer and U/S Burns, to keep our political talks on course.

Major Impediments to Democratic Progress

¶11. (C) The greatest obstacle to democratic progress in Ethiopia is probably the country's undemocratic history and political culture. Though the enormous turnout in this year's national elections demonstrated a real thirst for democracy among this country's 75 million people, there is practically no tradition of consensus-building and compromise at the national level (though village elders have long practiced these skills at the local level.) Political forces are either in power, or they are not. Political changes has invariably come in violent waves, usually accompanied by killings and purges of previous authorities.

¶12. (C) Many voters in rural areas, unfamiliar with disputed elections or power-sharing, reportedly concluded from vociferous opposition attacks during the 2005 electoral campaign that the GOE was seriously weakened. Post-election euphoria only reinforced these hopes and created unreasonable expectations, which in turn prompted CUD leaders to pursue a maximalist, confrontational strategy to force immediate, dramatic changes in the GOE. The EPRDF, on the other hand, was caught off-guard by the strength of anti-government sentiment and was utterly unprepared for giving up power. The Meles government's response was to clamp down suddenly and harshly on the democratic opening it had begun. The EPRDF now faces a scenario in which its popular support has likely dwindled further following killings and mass arrests, so any step towards a more open political system may be seen by its hard-core supporters as a step toward an exit from power.

¶13. (C) Growing ethnic tensions also pose a serious obstacle to reforming democratic institutions. The EPRDF regime has long-standing alliances with ethnically-based parties in nearly all of Ethiopia's diverse regions, but few of these political organizations formed by the EPRDF enjoy genuine majority support in their home areas. After 15 years in power, the EPRDF depends more than ever on a cadre of Tigrayan officials and supporters that it has deployed throughout the national and regional governments, as well as in the Armed Forces. This reliance on a narrow ethnic base for most sensitive positions has alienated many members of

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other large ethnic groups like Amharas and Oromos, and has

created the impression among many that a democratic transfer of power could lead to the settling of scores against Tigrayans. This perception is likely to make the current government less willing to loosen controls over electoral or political systems, and more likely to use dirty tricks to undermine serious rivals for power.

Other Influential Actors: EU, World Bank, African Union

¶14. (C) PM Meles has told the Charge and others on several occasions that Ethiopia's march toward democracy must take place on its own terms -- and will not be dictated by foreigners. The EU Observation Mission's report and other international criticism since the May 2005 election have only hardened this posture. Nevertheless, PM Meles remains sensitive to the deterioration of his government's formerly positive international reputation, particularly in Europe, the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, within Africa. In addition, Ethiopia remains highly dependent on external assistance to pursue its development strategy and to manage chronic balance of payments and budget deficits. While the GOE (probably rightly) believes it will escape large-scale cuts in humanitarian assistance, PM Meles and his cabinet are likely to be concerned about reductions in other assistance flows, particularly those received in the form of direct budget support (DBS). The World Bank, Britain, and the EU are the largest sources of DBS and therefore wield significant influence over the GOE.

¶15. (C) The African Union can also exercise some moral suasion over the GOE, particularly given that the organization makes its home in Addis. The AU has so far gone relatively easy on the EPRDF government in public, though AU Chairman Konare has reportedly been tougher in private. Some rumors have suggested that the AU might abandon Addis if there is a significant deterioration in the democratic climate, though this would be a dramatic and difficult step.

¶16. (C) Russia and China are both major players in Ethiopia; the former supplies large quantities of military equipment and training, while the latter has helped Ethiopia through aid and assistance to build up the country's infrastructure. Neither Russia nor China look likely to apply pressure or offer inducements for greater democratization, however. Indeed, some have speculated that China might make up some of the difference in reduced aid levels if Western donors assume a more critical position on Ethiopia.

Democracy Promotion the Government Supports

¶17. (C) To its credit, the EPRDF government put in place a constitution and many other institutional underpinnings of modern democracy during its 14 years in power. During this year's national election campaign, the GOE allowed unprecedented freedom for political activity, including a series of lively debates transmitted live on radio and television. Most observers believe that the EPRDF expected the opposition to win far fewer seats than it did in Parliament; some have suggested that the ruling party would never have embarked on this democratic opening if they believed they could lose power. Post continues to believe, however, that PM Meles is genuinely committed to deepening Ethiopian democracy but was unprepared for the speed with which change came. The PM has indicated to the Charge that he wishes to resume and accelerate democratic reforms, but clearly wishes to control the velocity and the direction of democratic change.

¶18. (C) The GOE has accepted some key elements of democratization while opposing others. Performance in many areas has been mixed. For example:

-- Independent political parties have been allowed to operate and claimed substantial numbers of seats in national and

regional assemblies, but GOE security forces and ruling party militia have engaged in systematic harassment of opposition parties.

-- Until the November 2005 demonstrations, Ethiopia boasted an impressive array of independent -- and generally pro-opposition -- newspapers. Many of the newspapers urged opposition leaders to take a hard line with the GOE and

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supported public demonstrations. Several editors have now been charged with treason and their papers blocked from publishing. Nonetheless, several independent papers continue to publish. The GOE has promised in principle to approve licenses for independent broadcast media, but has not approved any as yet. State media allowed opposition parties limited access during the election, but have reverted to government propaganda in the wake of the disputed election results.

-- The GOE has permitted many civil society organizations (CSOs) to operate, but has selectively cracked down on some. Leaders of two such organization are now under arrest in connection with the November 2005 demonstrations. Others, including some independent human rights organizations continue to operate. The GOE allowed international election observer missions from the U.S., EU and AU to monitor the May 2005 polls, but initially denied domestic observer missions the same privilege. The GOE also expelled National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI) personnel during this year's election campaign. Building the capacity of political parties or NGOs will thus be very difficult for outside actors.

-- Freedom of expression, particularly, through public demonstrations, has been especially controversial in recent months. Hundreds of thousands of opposition supporters were permitted to gather in Addis Ababa's main square prior to the May elections. Since that time, however, fearing that such gatherings would get out of control, the GOE has equated large public demonstrations with subversion. Demonstrations in June and November 2005 did indeed cost at least 40 lives each and led to thousands of arrests.

-- The GOE has agreed to accept capacity-building assistance from international donors including the U.S. to strengthen the capacity of Parliament, the media and the NEB. Some activities have already begun. The challenge will be to deliver such assistance so that it has a real impact and takes into account the needs of opposition parties as well as the GOE.

Consequences of Making Democracy a Priority

119. (C) The USG has a broad and strategic relationship with Ethiopia. Our growing intelligence relationship with the GOE contributes to our efforts to monitor Islamic extremist activity in Somalia and Somali regions of Ethiopia. A cut-off or serious reduction in military assistance and sales would almost certainly have an impact on this valuable relationship. How serious that impact would be would depend on how definitely our relationship with the EPRDF government is severed. The GOE might simply cease sharing information for a time if it hopes the problem will blow over, or might take action against the longer-term U.S. intelligence presence in Ethiopia.

120. (C) The USG has also enjoyed a cooperative and relatively successful relationship with the GOE on food security issues, working together to provide humanitarian aid to millions of Ethiopians vulnerable to drought and famine and to improve their long-term ability to maintain their livelihoods. We have a similarly positive working relationship with the GOE on treating and stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS. In a region

of characterized by weak and failed states, the GOE has demonstrated the ability to plan and implement development policies (though not always optimal) in partnership with international donors, maintain law and order effectively in most areas and generally serve as a stabilizing influence on the region. To the extent that tougher USG criticism or reductions in assistance weaken the EPRDF politically, there is a risk that public order could deteriorate, yield to civil conflict and/or eventual fragmentation of the country. Of course, there is also the possibility that the EPRDF government would be replaced by a strong but more enlightened regime composed of elements of the current opposition.

¶21. (C) Though PM Meles and his government have made clear commitments to democratization and have taken a number of important steps along this road, the GOE is likely to resent and resist aggressive USG efforts to deepen democracy. Much will depend, of course, on how we pursue our democratic agenda. If the USG continues to approach democratization in Ethiopia resolutely, but within the context of our valuable overall relationship, tensions should be manageable. In the

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end, GOE officials need us even more than we need them, so they are likely to burn bridges with the USG only if their political survival demands it.

¶22. (C) What are our prospects for promoting democracy in Ethiopia? The EPRDF has reached an important crossroads. The current slippage in the ruling coalition's popular support may convince many in the EPRDF that deepening democracy and creating impartial institutions will spell doom for their government. If the dominant group in EPRDF reaches that conclusion, there is likely little that the U.S. or broader international community can do to change their approach. If, however, PM Meles' remains genuinely committed to democracy -- whatever its outcome -- then a mixture of engagement and assistance with calibrated international pressure could help keep Ethiopia moving along the right path.

HUDDLESTON